

AL ALLANSON REPORTS: *Sea Otters on San Miguel!*

ON THE NINETEENTH of August, 1954, we were camped at Cuyler Harbor on San Miguel, most northerly of the Channel Islands off southern California. San Miguel Island is barren of trees, wind-swept, inhabited only by sea lions, elephant seals, foxes, birds, and — we hoped — sea otters.

We took our small skiff — my wife, Sibyl, and I — and rowed against the strong northerly wind. Slowly we made our way to the promontory near Bat Rock at the western end of Cuyler Harbor.

"Look!" Sibyl broke our silence suddenly in a hushed but excited voice.

Where she was looking I saw an animal in the water peering intently at us. A few feet behind it and just leaving a tidal pool was another. It had to climb over the little tidal barrier of rocks to reach open water. At that moment we got our finest view of the sea otter.

The sleek, dark brown body, broad, flattened head, and distinct tail were clearly visible as the animal crossed the tidal pool barrier and slipped quietly beneath the deeper waters of the channel, not more than ten feet from us. Sibyl and I looked at each other realizing we had just observed two sea otters in a locality where they had not been recorded for nearly a century. We had hoped for such rare luck, but scarcely expected to have it.

It seemed particularly appropriate that we should find these splendid sea mammals on San Miguel Island, for here was buried Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, Portuguese navigator who in 1542 discovered Alta California and the Channel Islands for the Spanish Crown. And to some degree the settlement of California, especially where the Russians and Americans came in, was stimulated by the presence of herds of sea otters on the rocky shores of both mainland and islands, where they were hunted for their valuable fur.

My search for sea otter on San Miguel was prompted by vague reports from abalone divers I knew and had talked to. In 1953 these divers claimed they had seen a total of five otters in a small cove on the north shore of the island, near the west end. Their observation makes it probable that more sea otters inhabit San Miguel than the two we saw the following year.

A large herd of sea otter was "discovered" in 1938 at Bixby Cove, 15 miles south of Monterey when the new highway was opened; this herd undoubtedly represented the last sea otters remaining south of the Alaska Peninsula at the time. Now we can report that the species has spread south still farther, and we may hope it will continue to increase and spread over its former range which once extended to Baja California.

On our return from San Miguel I reported our dis-

covery to Dr. Raymond M. Gilmore of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, La Jolla. A month after our trip Dr. Gilmore went to San Miguel on the research vessel *Orca* of the Joseph Sefton Foundation of San Diego. Although he explored the north and east shore of the island thoroughly, he saw no sea otters. Two other members of the party, Conrad Limbaugh and Arthur Kelly, covered the northeast end of the island from Cuyler Harbor to Harris Point. They also had no luck. However, my wife and I stayed on the island 11 days, and but for the one last search by rowboat along the Bat Rock Promontory we might also have come off without seeing any sea otter. Furthermore, the place where we saw our two can only be reached by a small skiff — it is not accessible to land parties or larger craft.

San Miguel is U. S. Navy property and was once used for a bombing range. Now, the diving boats that go to the coves for abalone or shelter from the wind, the sea lions, the elephant seals, the foxes, the birds, and the sea otters are the only visitors or inhabitants of this lonely place.

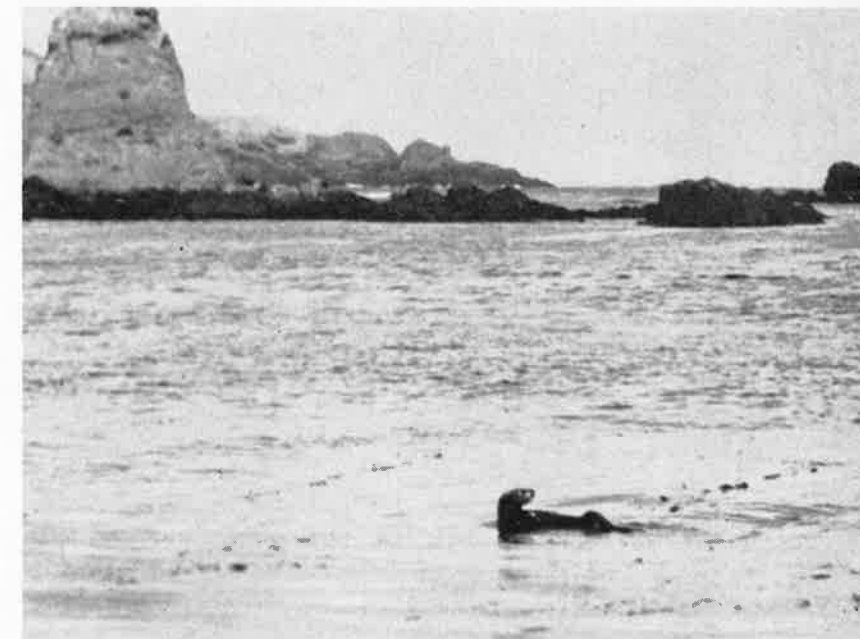
SCIENCE LOOKS INTO IT

These three photographs were taken at Amchitka Island, Alaska. (Courtesy U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

(Top) Adult sea otter. (Retouched photo, Warden Carl Loy)

(Center) Sea otter emerging from shallow water. (Robert D. Jones, Jr.)

(Bottom) Adult sea otter surprised on the beach. (Robert D. Jones, Jr.)



← San Miguel Island, with Otter Cove in the background. (Photograph by Al Allanson, August 1954)

